


# HENRY LEE MCFEE



*AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES*

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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# HENRY LEE MCFEE

BY

VIRGIL BARKER



*AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES*

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

TEN WEST EIGHTH STREET • NEW YORK

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*Publication of the books entitled  
MARY CASSATT, GLENN O. COLEMAN and  
ALLEN TUCKER has been postponed.  
These volumes will appear in 1932.*

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## FOREWORD

*THIS book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude F. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.*

*For assistance in preparing this volume for publication, we wish gratefully to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Frank K.M. Rehn Gallery for information regarding paintings used for illustration, to The Arts magazine for the loan of its files of photographs, and to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.*

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*  
Whitney Museum of American Art



Photograph by Stowall Studios

HENRY LEE MCFEE

# HENRY LEE MCFEE

BY

VIRGIL BARKER

THE painting of Mr. Henry Lee McFee exhibits with singular clarity a continuous and logical transformation in the relationship between craftsmanship and artistry.

Some other pair of words might be used to distinguish the two factors—matter and manner, or idea and expression, or end and means, or substance and appearance. But the first pair, at least as well as any others, make plain a distinction between what is said and how it is said; and with specific reference to painting they possess an initial advantage in being somewhat less abstract, more precise.

Whatever the terms, of course, they must not be forced into too absolute an opposition. Perhaps the very concreteness of the words here chosen makes it easier to perceive the overlapping, the mingledness, of the things they designate. So far from being mutually exclusive, where either is present there must be some trace of the other.

The lowest form of naturalistic illusionism involves more than craft, for with the mere act of looking comes into play the element of art. The most incompetent dauber of vague visions uses some degree of craft, for that comes into play with the mere act of painting. The artist's problem is now, as it always has been, to develop both elements to the utmost limits permitted by external circumstances and by the capacities of his own nature. The process of acquiring the craft is no less the process of evolving what is to be said with it, for the thing said must determine the way of saying it. But the significance of any artist's development lies only partly in any increased skill of utterance and more importantly in the emergence of the utterance itself into lasting dominance.

This general statement is beautifully illustrated by Mr. McFee's career; the succession of pictures from his hand offers a clear chronology of "open covenants openly arrived at." Nothing could be more candid than this record of his self-teaching by means of his admirations.

A painter's real beginning is not often his first drawing or his first picture. Rather is it the point at which he becomes conscious, however dimly, of his proper goal; the recording of this usually comes later still, in some work which marks a perceptible turn into the road toward that goal. Mr. McFee's record dates his real beginning on this side of impressionism.

This means that while still a student he had become dissatisfied with the attitudes then prevailing among painters in this country. He declined to join in any repetition of academic formulas whose basic sameness could not be concealed by more or less ostentatious technical differences; effort after an easily recognized personal stylism for its own sake is a form of egotism which must be outgrown by anyone who would rise from craftsmanship into artistry. He could not be content with any sort of semi-photographic naturalism; to copy the appearances of nature is not to capture the life of nature. He could not set to work at any variety of emotional tonalism; the life of a picture consists of something more than the painter's personal mood. The true picture as it came to be conceived after the rediscoveries of Cézanne, would have a structural form-life of its own independent of all else that might be in it and of all that might have fed the making of it. No more stopping short with a reminiscence of something else—other men's pictures or aspects of the visible world or one's own emotions—but a pushing on to the point where design could communicate to the mind a conviction of organic activity.

These sentences do not profess to be the literal wording of Mr. McFee's own thoughts in preparation for his work; they simply state the implications discernible in his earlier pictures. It would also be too much

to claim that those pictures are unflawed embodiments of the ideal here adumbrated, but they are attempts toward such embodiments which are both intelligent and intelligible.

A further stage in his progress was that of cubism. It was as inevitable for him as for modern painting generally, because cubism constituted the most direct attack possible upon the fundamentals of design. Cubism, in its relation to appearances, has been well described by Mr. Andrew Dasburg as "the dissolution of the objective image until it ultimately became incorporated in the space surrounding it." Both a cause and an effect of this procedure was the realization that in a complete picture the spaces around and between the objects should function as actively as the objects; thus to decompose both objects and spaces was one way of learning how to recompose them so that each should be as important as the other. In the use of this pictorial idiom no American painter has been more successful than Mr. McFee and some of his paintings will remain among the very few which mark the high tide of cubism in this country.

In part overlapping this stage and in part succeeding it came certain striking experiments with the material qualities of pigment. Although such qualities were never absent from the purer form of cubism just discussed, the emphatic tactilism of this group has a character of its own. Where the former interest can be fairly described as mainly intellectual, this is even more plainly sensuous; and in spite of its compromising a pedantically correct cubism, it most decidedly forwarded the painter's mastery of the medium.

Then, with technical ease and fullness, with a complete fusion of intellectual and sensuous elements, came Mr. McFee's particular kind of "return to nature." To eyes unfamiliar with modern painting's mode of creation, Mr. McFee might appear, at this stage of his progress, to have abandoned his habit of abstraction and to have adopted the use of nat-

uralistic forms; but in fact he only concerned himself more intensely with the very thing which had been his principal interest all along. His willingness to use a greater degree of optical faithfulness was essentially no more than an indication of his own greater power of perception and execution. For his new use of appearances did not involve any recurrence to the normal layman's vision of them; they are never rendered for their own sake, they are always synthesized into what the painter himself calls "plastic units" of visual form. What he states in any given painting of his maturity never actually occurs in the particular collection of physical objects that make up his picture; it occurs first of all in his own mind and then, if he succeeds in his artistry, in the picture. Once it occurs there, it can occur again in every mind capable of comprehending the language of design. This language is used by Mr. McFee with dignity and deliberation to express his own understanding of the one fundamental problem of all art, which is to make perfect an otherwise imperfect experience.

The outstanding characteristic of the experience thus perfected for us in his painting is visual richness. His best pictures, in the integrity of their intention, in the mellow depth of their colour, in the plenitude of their form, in the fullness of their grave ordering, afford a rarely pure satisfaction to the mind. They are the visual parallels of three words by Shakespeare which make at least one of life's final utterances: "Ripeness is all."

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

HENRY LEE McFEE was born in St. Louis, Mo., April 14th, 1886, of American parentage. He began the study of painting in 1907. After a year of preliminary work in Pittsburgh, Pa., he went, in 1908, to Woodstock, N. Y., where he entered the summer classes of the Art Students' League, at that time under the instruction of Birge Harrison. He made Woodstock his home and, since 1910, has painted in that colony. After two years of independent study he exhibited in 1912 with the Post Impressionists at the McDowell Club, New York, and in 1916 at the "Forum Exhibition." Since that time his work has been shown in most of the important national and international exhibitions where it has been accorded the following honors: Honorable Mention, International Exhibition, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1923; Clark Prize, \$500, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., 1928; First Honorable Mention and the Garden Club Prize, International Exhibition, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1930.

His paintings have been acquired by many private collectors and he is represented in the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, N. Y.; the Albright Gallery, Buffalo, N. Y.; the Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio; the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Mich.; the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.; the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N. Y.

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- "Henry Lee McFee," by Alexander Brook, *The Arts*, 1923—v. 4, pp. 251-261; illus.

"Henry Lee McFee," by Elisabeth Luther Carey, *Creative Art*, March, 1924—v. 4.

"Exhibition, Rehn Galleries," by J. Shapley, *Parnassus*, April, 1929.



## ILLUSTRATIONS

STILL LIFE—APPLES, 1930  
H. 40 inches W. 30 inches



THE QUARTERS, 1928  
H. 24 inches W. 24 inches



STILL LIFE, 1930

h. 30 inches w. 24 inches

*Collection of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., New York*



FRUIT IN GLASS COMPOTE, 1928

h. 30 inches w. 20 inches





A YOUNG AMERICAN, 1928

h. 40 inches w. 30 inches

*Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lesley Green Sheaffer  
New York*



STILL LIFE WITH DECANTER, 1930  
h. 32 inches w. 30 inches



PORTRAIT—MAN IN A HIGH HAT, 1925  
H. 24 inches W. 20 inches

*Collection of The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy  
Albright Art Gallery*





CROW WITH PEACHES, 1928

h. 30 inches w. 24 inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*

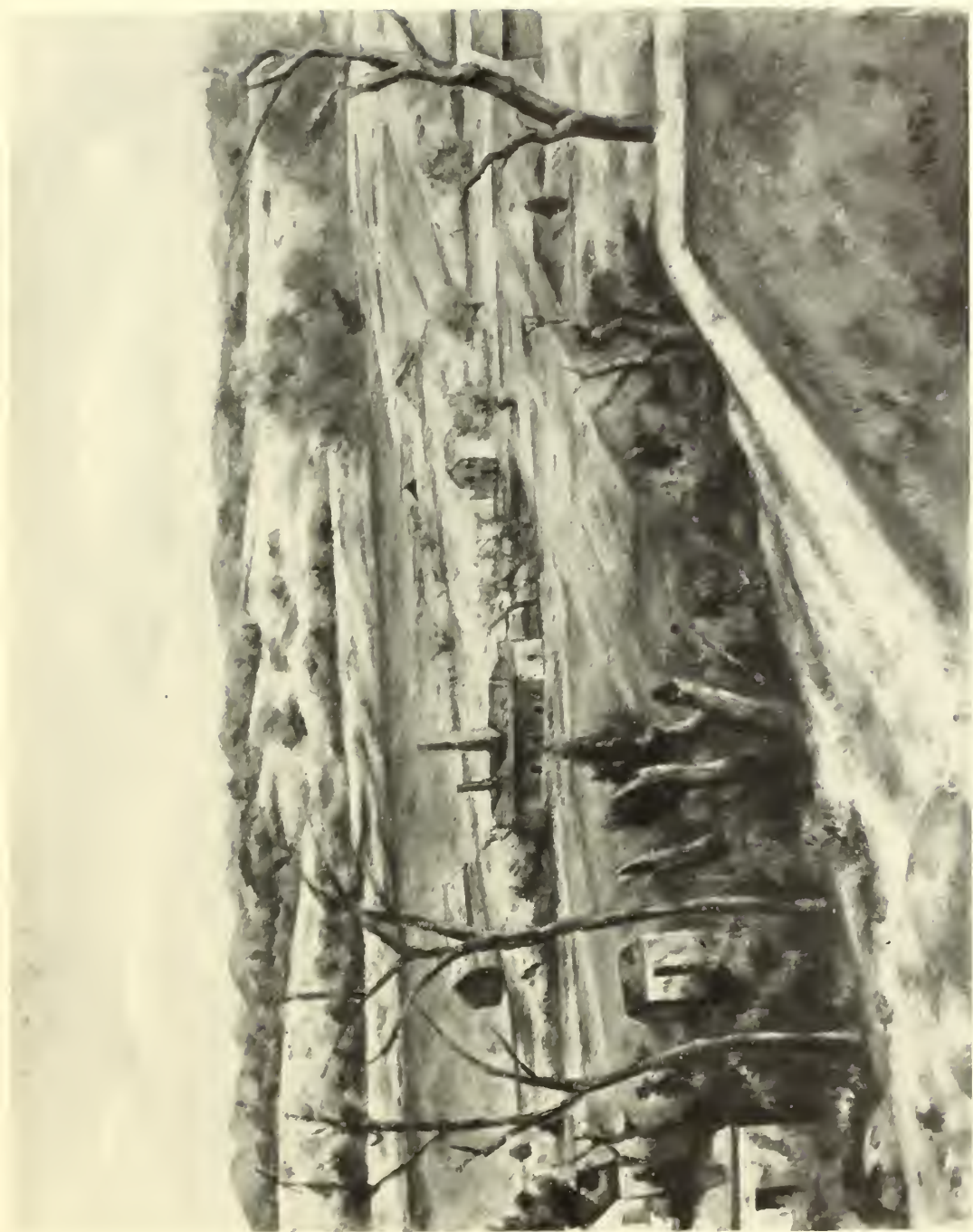




LANDSCAPE, VIRGINIA, 1928-29

h. 24 inches w. 30 inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*



LEAVES, 1927  
h. 30 inches w. 24 inches  
*Collection of Mr. Edward W. Root*  
*Clinton, N. Y.*



PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN, 1925  
(DENNISON CHASE)

h. 24 inches w. 20 inches

*Collection of Mr. Carl W. Hamilton, New York*





BOUQUET OF POPPIES, 1927

h. 30 inches w. 20 inches

*Collection of Detroit Institute of Arts*

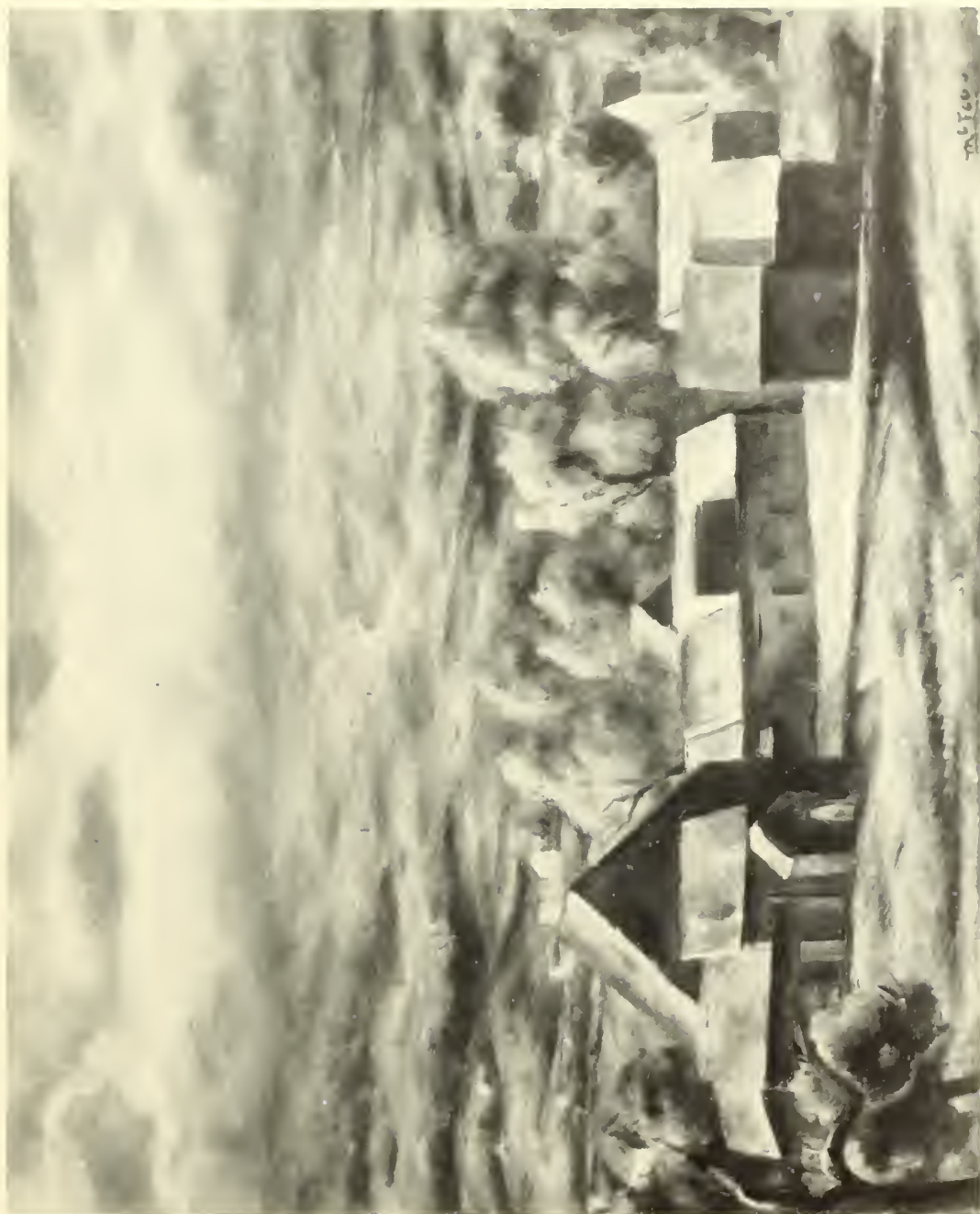




THE VALLEY, 1925-26

H. 20 inches    W. 24 inches

*Collection of Dr. and Mrs. L. Vernon Briggs, Boston*



BOUQUET—PETUNIAS AND PHELOX. 1926

h. 30 inches w. 24 inches

*Collection of Mr. Carl W. Hamilton, New York*



P O R T R A I T, 1920  
h. 20 inches   w. 16 inches

*Collection of Mrs. Harry F. Evans, Davenport, Iowa*





ORIENTAL POPPIES. 1925

h. 30 inches w. 24 inches

*Collection of Mr. Carl Weeks, Des Moines, Iowa*

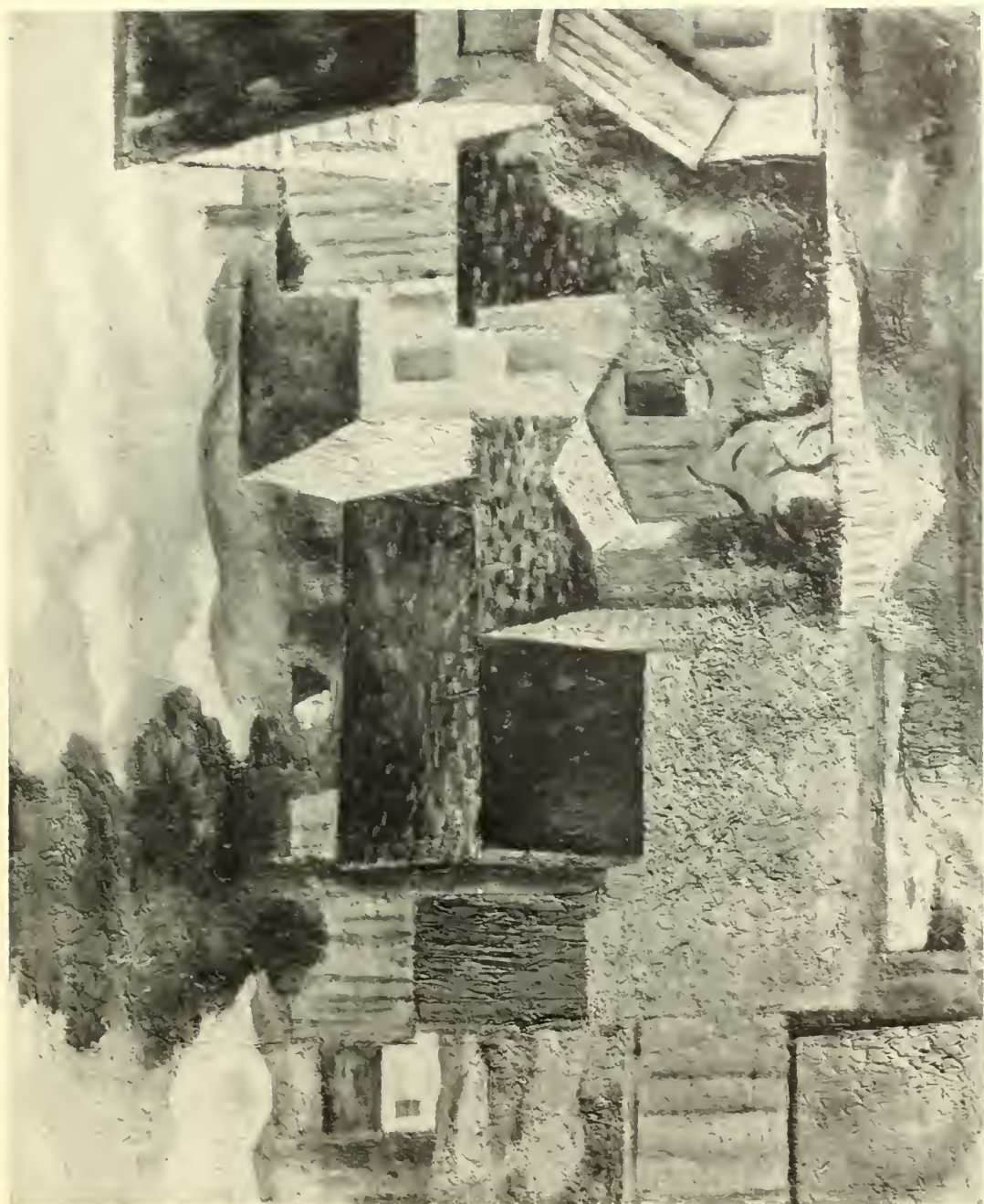




BUILDINGS, WOODSTOCK, 1922-23

h. 12 inches w. 16 inches

*Collection of Emma Bellows, New York*



GLASS JAR WITH GLASS, 1922-23

h. 16 inches w. 12 inches

*Collection of Miss Jane Heap, New York*






GLASS JAR WITH SUMMER SQUASH, 1919

h. 24 inches w. 20 inches

*Collection of Dr. Alfred Braun, New York*




  
 PORTRAIT OF AILEEN CRAMER, 1918

h. 24 inches    w. 20 inches

*Collection of Miss Clementine Randolph, New York*









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